



i magazine

i

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Well?

What are you looking at?

What do you expect to see here?

You, who think you can see through this paper window into my soul!

I'm none of your business.

Why should I bare myself?

I suppose I'd like to help ..., but

Would it make any difference?

Would this ink touch you at all?

Stay away!

The cost is too high for me;

I'd never know if my pain was worth your relief.

You've already seen too much.

If this ink did touch you ...

It would only stain the side you hide most.

Don't touch me.

Mama

I never really believed she would die, although it was quite obvious she was going to. Every morning I'd get up and slip quietly down the stairs and stand in the doorway in the hall and ever so carefully look towards her room and listen and look to see if her chest would rise and fall. It did, it always did.

I'd go into the bathroom and fill the blue basins the hospital gave us with warm water and go to her.

She'd be awake by now and would ask for the bedpan. I'd get the sheets and towels out, and the stuff for her dressings. I'd ask her how she was this morning and she'd tell me she loved me.

"How do the sores look?" she'd ask.

"Oh much better," I'd answer.

"How about the tumors? Are they smaller? They feel smaller."

"Yes," I'd say.

Nothing was better, nothing was smaller. Everything was just getting worse. I couldn't tell her. She knew, she really did.

She'd be so quiet.

I would empty the bedpan and come back to wash her.

It was fall now, the leaves were turning, becoming beautiful, colorful, dying.

"Oh, Mum, it's so nice out, the leaves are changing. I'll go out and get you some so you can see them too."

I'd wash her. I would look at her stomach. At the stretch marks that I made when I was in her. When I was her baby. Now she was my baby.

"I don't want to eat."

"Okay, Mum, maybe I can make you something later. I'll go outside now and get the leaves."

The next night, morning, I don't know. It was 2 am. It was Thursday. I heard her. I ran down the stairs. She was bleeding. Bleeding so bad out of her mouth, all over.

She looked at me, and her eyes, her eyes were just like an animal's.

"It's okay, it's okay, don't be scared. I'll clean you up." I WILL FIX YOU!

Scared, scared, scared. She's a mess. I can't change that dressing. I've never changed that dressing. There's no one else here. Oh God, don't look, don't let me see, please.

It's okay, IT'S OKAY, TERESA, DO IT!

She's cleaned up. I'm messed up.

"Don't let them take me now, let me die here," she asks.

Don't worry, I love you. Don't be afraid. I won't let them. I won't leave you alone. Mum, I love you, sleep."

The day, the morning, the night, she's in a coma. She breathes heavy. Terrible breathing, "death rattles" they call them. On and on and on.

Everyone is upstairs in bed sleeping. I lie down on the couch and wait. I go to her, it is a quarter to five. I put ice chips in her mouth. I do not want her to die thirsty.

She breathes quietly now, slowly, softly — "It's me, Teresa, I love you," I say.

I go back to the couch and lie down. I hear a noise. I look up. Her arms are up, she is reaching out. Don't go in there. Let it happen. Let her go.

My brother stands over me. "She's cold, Teresa."

"Yes." I go to her.

"Mama," I say.

"Mama, wake up, please wake up!"

Her eyes, she has gone.

"Should I wake everyone up?" my brother asks.

"No, not yet, please, just ten minutes," I say.

"Okay."

I get out the blue basins. I fill them with warm water. I wash her. I rub her stomach to feel the stretch marks.

"I tried so hard, Mum, you know."

I brush her hair. Wash her face. Close her eyes. Kiss her lips. The leaves on the table are dead. My baby, my mother, my life is gone.

Teresa Brown

The Runners

It descended in beads, a few, light trickles,
Soon to become a heavy downpour.
My stomach rose to greet my throat.
I waited on that white line for the shot ...
Fired, our arms, legs struggled to become one;
My gasps in rhythm with my Nikes that pounded the pavement,
Our heads throbbed in a deep pit of concentration.
The rain continued ...
Our feet slashed through the unavoidable puddles,
Sneakers slashed over spongy moss of the earth,
Our hair at first only damp,
Now tangled and drenched in clumps.
Gold, green, white, red, blue uniforms,
Draped from our shoulders,
A faded rainbow of washed out colors.

Ernie Dube

Carl

I never thought it was gonna happen to me. I was conned. "Oh, big deal," you say. "Get on with the story," you say. I can see spit flying from your lips. Well, sorry, this is important. It's not like I was suckered in by the Hare Krishnas. This religious group is scary. I call it Carl's Group. I met Carl around two years back. I was out for my 5 A.M. pigeon feeding at Central Park North.

"Okay, mister, gimme your money." A man was stickin' a gun in my ear.

"Of all da nerve. You could be robbin' those rich bastards at Central Park West. Here. Alls I gots a five."

The robber ran away. Figures. The day I leave home without my Uzi. New compact model. Kinda cute.

"Hi, I'm Carl. You look depressed. I have a secret that will change your outlook on life."

I just stared at the ground. A pigeon gang fight was starting.

"Meet me, and my friends at Rockaway Beach, 6 A.M. tomorrow, if you want to know the secret."

Score! One pigeon dead for gang one, three dead for gang two. He left. Time to go. Had to deliver the mail.

I thought about what Carl said. What happens at Rockaway? An orgy? I had to find out. I called up work later on that night. Told 'em that a truck ran over my legs. They said they'd see me day after tomorrow.

I peeked through the seaweed. I was under it for 15 minutes. Didn't want 'em to see me. Had to get there before 'em. Then they came. They all started digging. Nobody said nothin'. Then they stopped digging. I can't tell ya how big the holes were. Too much seaweed in my eyes.

"One, two, three, four," Carl said.

Then everybody sung, and danced the Hokey Pokey. After that, half of them jumped in their holes. I was relieved. I thought they were gonna bury some bodies. Anyways, the half that were outside the holes buried the ones that were inside the holes. They buried 'em up to their chins. I saw people comin' at me. They started pullin' at my seaweed.

"Hi! you remembered," Carl said. "Don't be shy, join us. We were just about to place the seaweed. I'm glad you came. You won't regret it. Here, have a hole."

Next thing I knew, he throws me into this hole. Ten of these people start burying me. They were singin' the theme song from Sesame Street. Then, they put this seaweed around my head. I didn't know what to do. Then I heard this whistle. All the rest of 'em jumped into their holes, and threw as much sand in their holes as they could.

"Montrose," Carl yelled.

Then, I swear to God, this giraffe comes runnin' onto the beach. He started pushing sand into the holes. After all the sand was in, the giraffe would pat the sand down with his hoof. Then, the guy in the hole would say, "Thank you, Montrose." Then the giraffe ran away.

"Think Pig," Carl said to everybody.

So, what else could I do? I thought pig.

Sometimes I amaze myself, I was relaxed. Livin' in N.Y. all my life, I never felt that way before. Then everything went to shit.

"Those ducks, those insipid ducks," Carl yelled.

He was right. Ducks all over the beach. Quacking like they owned the place.

"Pigs in heaven, hear my plea! Get these ducks away from me," Carl said.

Nothin' happened. Heaven never listens. So, they all started to grab the birds by the beaks, usin' their mouths. They threw the ducks all over the place. The ducks got sick and tired of this and left to find a pond. I closed my eyes, and thought pig.

At dusk, Montrose came back. He went right up to Carl, and started to dig him out. After Carl's arms were out, he grabbed Montrose's back legs. Montrose pulled him out. Montrose pulled all of us out. The guys in the group didn't help each other. They let the giraffe do all the work.

"Enlightening, isn't it?" Carl asked me.

"Yeah, sure," I said. I didn't understand what the hell he said.

"Come to Mass with us. I promise you there will be no ducks there. Afterwards, we can dine together."

"Sure," I said. I'll do anything for a free meal.

"Everyone," Carl said, "it is now time for Mass."

We got on the subway. I was hoping they wouldn't sing. They painted instead. Spray painted. "Have faith in Pig, for the end is near!" one said. "Those who eat bacon will surely die," said another. I thought somethin' was funny, but I wanted free food.

Carl's apartment was empty, except for a big kettle in the middle of the room. Somethin' smelled good. It was Jello. Lime Jello. Everybody was takin' off their shoes and socks. I figured Carl didn't want his floor dirty, so I did the same thing.

Carl opened the closet door, and pulled out some buckets. One by one, he filled the buckets with Jello from the kettle. Then, he'd give it to a group member. They put their buckets on the floor. I finally got mine. I thought it was nice of them to wait for me.

"Hey, where's the spoon?" I asked.

"Let the Mass begin," Carl said.

Everybody then stuck their feet into the buckets of Jello. Boy, was I embarrassed. I never seem to do the right thing when I'm in a group.

"Brothers, we all know the end is near. So let us rejoice! For the Flying Pig said to us, 'You will be delivered! All pork eaters will perish!' We will be able to bury ourselves in sand without ridicule! We will hold Mass to millions, in a sea of Jello! Friends, your Pig is a loving Pig, but fear his wrath! For those on the wrong side of his hoof will surely be crushed!"

I was conned. I believed. It all seemed so real. I was ready to give my soul to the Flying Pig. The guys made me feel like I belonged. They made me feel better than the regular Joe. That gave me hope for the future.

"Amen," Carl yelled. Then, he snorted like a pig.

"Amen, snort, snort," everybody yelled.

"Alright," a voice from outside yelled, "come out with your hands up."

"Hallelujah!" I yelled, with my hands up. "The good Pig wants to see us all! Snort, snort."

"This is the police," the voice said. "Come out with your hands up, or we'll come up shooting."

Everybody panicked, except me. I thought, in my crazy state, that the Flying Pig was talking to us. Jello flew everywhere.

The next thing I knew, I woke up in bed. I guessed that the cops threw teargas into the joint. My pajamas fit me, but felt funny. Then I saw the bars.

I've been here three years now. Those guys in Carl's Group stole the giraffe. I couldn't convince the judge that I wasn't in on it. Oh, well, I'm kinda glad it happened. I'll never be tricked again. I live in the real world now.

Vikki Gilbert

A humble man
Awakens early,
Rolling out of his warm bed
And onto the chilled floor.
He stops and watches her
In silence
For an infinite moment,
And wonders
Does she dream of him?

Larry Shattuck

Serendipity

She had a nice face. It was gentle, with good features that fit together in just the right way. Her mouth intrigued me. It was the way her lips fitted around her teeth when she smiled. I loved watching her when she spoke, in that elegant, but unaffected voice. Her soft eyes were blue, faded with age. They glowed, as though reflecting a light from a deep and mysterious source from within. Her grey hair was cut short, yet there was nothing masculine about her, in any way. Average height, her figure was thick through the middle, the way old people become, even though they are not overweight.

I thought she was the most provocative, fascinating, attractive woman I had ever known. Of course, at sixteen, living a narrow and unsophisticated life, I hadn't had much opportunity to meet very many interesting women. Certainly, not with the personality and character of Miss Rumford.

She was my English teacher. All I remember of that year is learning about newspapers, how to research a subject, write an essay, and Miss Rumford. The most important was Miss Rumford.

Kind, if she had a favorite student, or unfavorite, no one knew it. She was incapable of the caustic reprimands of Miss Estey, the Latin II teacher, who would admonish the class with such snideness as, "It simply amazes me how lacking some of you are in English syntax. No wonder you're having problems." The Teutonic commands of Miss Detweiler, the biology teacher, were dispensed in Gestapo fashion, filling the lab with a heavy cloud of displeasure. "You'd better get over your squimishness fast, young ladies, if you're going to dissect these frogs!" Sitting at the lab table, scalpel poised, my brain would scream back at her, "You damn daughter of Eichman. My frog is still breathing."

English wasn't an escape from the other classes, though. I was used to the likes of Miss Estey and Fraulein Detweiler.

Miss Rumford had a delightful way of digressing from the matter at hand. She would get off the track for half the period, expounding on subjects totally unrelated to the lesson, or to English, for that matter. Her knowledge and interests were so vast, she just couldn't help it. She had so much enthusiasm that she couldn't or wouldn't suppress herself. (I remember thinking that being old must be nice. Obviously it gave one freedom and relieved one from the binds of rigid routine.)

The younger English teachers never deviated from THE JUNIOR ENGLISH PLAN. They stuck to it like a private following a colonel's command. They were also incredibly boring.

Well, Miss Rumford would be talking about yellow journalism and the word yellow would remind her of Van Gogh. We'd have a wonderful art appreciation class. If we had a poem with the word house, it would remind her of Frank Lloyd Wright. That day we would learn architecture. Temple would beget Judaism, and so on. All the while she was teaching us music, ballet, art, social reform, botany, philosophy, and English, her blue eyes would sparkle and her face would be animated. She was enthusiastic and had a zest for life that only those who embrace it running, with arms outstretched, can know. Then, she would smile in that sweet way, sigh to herself and say, "Well, now, I guess we had better get back to the lesson."

Ginger Frankel, sitting on my right, would pick her nailpolish, or doodle her boyfriend's name on her notebook. Betty George on my other side would slouch, stick her legs out straight, and put on that catatonic expression she used at will. The rest of the class would be relieved, yet bored. But I loved it. I sat, mesmerized, enthralled, and soaked up the essence of Miss Rumford like a sponge. She had opened doors through which I peeked, curious as to what other marvelous and wonderful discoveries awaited when I pushed them open still further.

I learned enough about English that year. I learned everything about the riches of life. How I never had to be ashamed of wonder, enthusiasm, or joy.

I was so crazy about Miss Rumford that the memory of her stayed with me over the years. Every once in a while, something would remind me of her. I'd feel happy and good about life and myself. I also opened a lot of fabulous doors.

About twenty years ago, it occurred to me that Miss Rumford must be long, long, dead. I was sad until I remembered that she had expressed an intense desire to be reincarnated. When she spoke of it, her eyes danced as she explained the many arts and occupations she longed to pursue, and of the many lives she needed in order to fulfill those dreams. "Oh, I would like to come back and have a life as a ..." and then she named all of those lives. I desperately hoped that reincarnation was true, for Miss Rumford's sake.

It was then that I started looking. Whenever I met or saw a stranger with soft blue eyes that sparkled from secret pleasure, I would make a point of meeting and talking with her. "It might be Miss Rumford. I don't want to miss her," I would think.

One day, I realized that Miss Rumford wouldn't have to come back as a woman in one of her lives. She could be a man. Her eyes might be brown, not blue. Besides, she wouldn't be in Franklin County, Massachusetts! No! She'd be searching for a new fauna in the Amazon jungle, painting her heart out somewhere in the French countryside, or living a life of goodness and serenity in a Tibetan monastery.

I told myself I was looney-bin material for looking for her — a bad habit which I should break.

Habits are difficult to change though. It requires great effort and just plain hard work. I convinced myself that, as habits go, it was harmless; having numerous others that were far worse and really ought to be taken care of first, I decided to keep it. After all, what real harm did it cause? Why, I've met some lovely people along the way because of it.

The real reason, though, is that I was afraid that the memory of Miss Rumford would fade and that I might forget her. She and serendipity had become one. I would lose the best part of myself, the part I like the most, the part that gives meaning, hope, and joy to my life. I might become battery operated without the batteries.

I don't want to forget Miss Rumford! Ever.

Beverly Harrington

Crypt

Her blue eyes hold me,
Yearning,
Questioning.
I begin to reply
Only to repeat what others have said.
Indeed, it is the truth that she speaks,
But now and again
What is true may never surface
But hover hidden
Restrained by careful souls
Thrashing
Storming
As we storm
Who may choose
For another
We cry
Who may sever the joy
Unless permitted to issue the
Never.
Do I know
That I too am capable
Of many things — benevolent
Or not so
And that my sea
Harbors ships as fragile?

Donna J. Moran
February 1988

A Token Of Love

Without so much as a shred of Baryshnikov's style, my Nikes shield my toes as I strain to peek out that one last inch needed to reach the most vibrant, blossom-laden geranium in the place. Today it's nothing but the best, nothing but the very best! Just as my heels touch the ground, the hanger lets go and breaks the pot to smithereens, the Mona Lisa of plantdom was now little more than a mangled addition for the compost pile!

I heard someone snickering in the background, "I knew you could do it!" The disembodied voice sounded as if it was bouncing right off my shoulder and into my ear.

I practically screamed, "Dad!?" The sound of my voice echoing from within the greenhouse walls quieted my next statement to a near whisper. Embarrassed and surprised, I looked around before I spoke to see who else had witnessed the event, and realized that we were alone. I kind of popped him playfully on the shoulder for teasing me, and said, "I wasn't expecting you so early, but I'm awful glad to see you!"

"Just thought I'd follow you 'round a bit, find out how it's done!" he said with that characteristic grin of his, but the tremor in his voice told me the feelings ran deeper ... he misses me too ... emotions embarrass him ... I can just hear him now, "Actions speak louder than words, right, Princess?"

Something inside swells with pride in just the knowing of this simple man. Even yet, one of the handsomest men I've ever know. The twinkle in his warm blue eyes shows brightly beneath that gorgeous, full head of dark hair. Nature had not betrayed him ... born in 1921, a full year older than Mom, now 65, his years appeared far fewer; one would think 55, maybe 56 on the outside. I guess I'm just a Daddy's Girl ... or perhaps Freud was right — all daughters are in love with their fathers, but his strength and charm still shines through for me.

"Been awhile since I've done this sort of thing, you know?" he remarked as we sauntered past each musty, moisture-laden bench. Despite his admission, I found myself waiting for his nod of approval as I chose, for only those plants at their peak of display would do ... after all, today was such a special day.

"I could use some help with this," I mumbled as my arms fumbled the jungle of plants I'd collected.

With his usual sense of humor, he feigned a limping sort of motion, placed his hand against his hip, and muttered, "Oh, my aching back, you planning to plant a park with all this stuff?"

"Can't you be serious, even now? This is important to me!" I said, a bit on the defensive. It seems he finds humor in everything ... even this somewhat somber day.

Sorting through the clutter, my fingers grasp the billfold from the belly of my purse. As I exchange my green cash for a bit of nature's own, I catch a glimpse of Dad's ski-jump nose reflected in the misty glass of the greenhouse. Genes do tell ... such traits passing from one generation to the next ... but Lord, why'd I have to get that nose? Not so bad, I suppose ... his gentle nature passed on from son to daughter ... A love of family ... respect for truth and especially the invaluable ability to laugh at ourselves ... Thankfully, genes do tell!

On bended knees, I lovingly secure my purchases into their summer home, the red spikey blossoms serving as backdrop. The border of sunshine-yellow marigolds stand like soldiers in tribute on snow-like mounds of white alyssum.

Dad reminds me, "Trim those yews down close ... fuller bush, you know!" As is his style, he adds a nod and a wink; a smile washes over me from the warmth.

"I remember ...," I say, then finish within my own thoughts ... My life is just brimming over with gentle reminders from you ... you taught me how to find joy in the simple, everydayness of life.

Now, with the curtain about to close on our brief visit, I struggled for words to express what I felt. "I know you hate it when I get sentimental, but this means a lot to me, this time that we share, and I guess I wish it were more than once a year, but ... well ..."

A pitiful attempt, I know, but then his words echo once more, "Actions speak louder than words, Princess!"

With trowel in hand, I add the finishing touch to my miniature garden, then ease back to reflect on the artistry of the display. Letters ... chiseled in marble ... intrude abruptly as a stark reminder. There it is ... the name, his name ... Elliott E. McAllister; such a nice name ..., but the numbers, those damn numbers are etched as deeply in my heart as in that stone ... 1921-1977. Fifty-six ... stolen away at fifty-six ... as Paul Harvey would say, "He'll forever be, fifty-six."

Using the sturdy monument for support, I rise.

I touch the stone tenderly.

I love you ... Dad,

Same time next year?

Linda L. Wallace

Treasures

I don't smack the gnats that
pester on summer's damp evenings
As the swinging chair I rest in
creaks with the rocks between my memories.
I sat in tar puddles on the
railroad ties because I never looked
and watched a bull swinging upside down
guttled over a stained cement slab — once.
There are pictures of me, small,
on hands and knees feeding the dog muddy water,
After the long thunderstorm sky had drifted
Leaving shadows that cooled the still of the cattle gaps.
And then there was a slight city
without roosters and warm eggs,
even the cows were lost.
From the swing I pull my body
to take my past down the road aways,
As I walk what I could drive in
two minutes, in twenty

Tammy Armstrong

Hitchhiking

I stand alongside Highway 11 south of Birmingham as black clouds boil. Lightning flashes yellow and wind blows my cardboard sign; it reads, "LOS ANGELES." Thunder roars.

A green, beat-up station wagon pulls over. Its tailpipe rattles and smoke shoots from it. A bearded man sticks his head from the window. "What are you waiting for?" he shouts. Five Hell's Angels man the old car. "Well?" he shouts again. "You coming?" Lightning flashes again and the black clouds swirl. I pick up my bag and run to hop in the back seat.

"If we'd known you were coming," says the fat Angel to my left, "we would've baked a cake." He sports a red and blue sword on his torso, tattooed from his hairy chest down to his navel, where the blade's point seems to balance on the point where his mother was cut from him. The man to my right wears a winged and skulled jacket. It's so greasy that it may have been used to clean a grill in a coffee shop.

"My name's Jed," he says. "You going to L.A.?"

"I want to see what it's like," I say.

The bearded one in the front seat pops a can of Budweiser and the beer spews all over the windshield. He sticks the beer into my hand. I can't stop thinking that this may be my last beer.

"You're with us now," he says. "We share."

"Yeah," says the fat one with the tattoo. "You got anything to share?" I put the hot beer to my lips and take a swallow; I hope that this will hide my fear. I have sixty-five dollars and can't afford to part with it.

"Don't mind Fat Bread," says Jed. "He's just testing you."

"I always screw with people," says Fat Bread. "It keeps their eyes open. Go on, drink your beer."

"You guys got bikes?" I say, starting to relax.

"Cops got 'em in New Orleans," says Fat Bread. "That's where we're headed now. We been back in Pennsylvania getting money to get our bikes back. We got into a fight at Mardi Gras. That's when the pigs took our wheels."

"Look at this baby," says Jed. He takes a snapshot from his wallet and I study a chopped Harley Davidson with Jed on it. A blonde has her arms wrapped around his waist. "I wiped out on it twice," says Jed.

"He needs training wheels," says Fat Bread.

"Screw you," says Jed. "You couldn't drive an elevator without a compass."

Fat Bread's belly shakes as he laughs and the red and blue sword seems to come alive; five red drops of blood have been tattooed to drip from the blade down into his hairy hole.

"Knock it off," says the bearded one, trying to sleep.

Rain pours and the wipers flip like crazy on the windshield. I finish the Budweiser as Jed pulls a firecracker from his jeans jacket.

"Watch this," he whispers. Jed strikes the match and a yellow flame lights the fuse. Smoke rises as he places the firecracker under the seat of the bearded one; he sleeps with his head back, and his mouth is open as he snores. "Got to do something with time," says Jed.

The firecracker explodes, and the bearded sleeper becomes a Jack-in-the-box, shooting towards the ceiling. "You son-of-a-bitch!" he shouts.

"I only wanted to make sure your dreams are exciting," says Jed.

"One big happy family," says Fat Bread. "Want to go to New Orleans?"

"Yeah," says Jed. "We'll have a blast."

"Let me think about it," I say.

Four hours later, the storm is over, and we pull over into a roadside park because the car is overheating.

"Jed," calls Fat Bread. "Here's a home for you." Fat Bread sticks his hand deep into a barrel marked "PUT GARBAGE HERE." He pulls a paper bag from the barrel. He opens it. "Cheese sandwiches," he says. "Four of 'em."

Jed smells the food. "Hey," he says "They're still fresh. You want one, Jerry?"

"I'm not hungry," I say.

Fat Bread swallows a sandwich in three bites.

"Used to run a charm school," says Jed, shaking his head at Fat Bread.

The car motor cools and we hit the road again. The interstate sign reads "NEW ORLEANS."

"Sure you won't come?" says Jed.

"Thanks," I say. "Guess I'll push into L.A. You guys take it easy. And good luck with the New Orleans P.D."

Part of me wishes I had gone with the Angels, for I admire their carefree style. Indeed, I would need a touch of their tough sense of humor in the days that followed in L.A. But that's another story.

James Samson

Surely in Halifax, I'd be
Haulin' them nets
on a fishin' boat
an' wearin' a wool cap.
I'd pick up an accent
from somewhere I ain't,
keep my face turned to the
salt wind and spray ...,
dry wood and nets would be
roughin' my hands,
if I were a man
but I ain't —
so I'll cook the fish.

Sue O'Neill

The Gleaner

She was so excited. She was going South with her father and on a train. She had never been on a train. But she had been South, except that it didn't count, because she was so small that she didn't remember it.

They lived in a medium size town with neighbors, neighborhoods and where her mother's family lived. Being an only child, it was nice having all those cousins living nearby, whom she saw at school and could play with on weekends. It was the next best thing to having brothers and sisters.

Going "down home," to visit "my people" is how her father expressed it. She wondered why he said it that way, but sometimes he said things a little differently. It had something to do with his being from Georgia. She was used to it and supposed that it was because everyone else in the family was a Northerner.

Her father's family and Georgia were a shadowy part of her life; one which she yearned to know, though she certainly wasn't lacking for family. Now, she was going to have faces, voices and personalities to put together with all those names, that were funny like hers. She was going to see for herself that mystical place called "down home," and make it a part of her life so that she could feel complete.

Her mother took her shopping, buying her a coat that cost so much money that even she knew it was expensive, confirming what she already knew. This was, indeed, to be a very special event.

When she asked her father if she should take her sled, he laughed when he replied, "No girl, there won't be any snow there." No snow! In the middle of February! She couldn't imagine such a place. Now, she really knew that the magic carpet called a train was definitely going to take her to a place that even Ali Baba would envy.

Even though she had never been on a train, she knew all about them. She and her cousins went to the double feature every Saturday afternoon. She couldn't wait to eat in a dining car, sleep in an upper berth in the sleeping car and walk down the aisle, swaying as one with the train. It was as exciting as traveling to a faraway land on the Orient Express, only without the bad guys like Peter Lorri, because this was America.

She wasn't the least bit disappointed when her father told her that they might not be able to get a sleeping berth because of the war and the number of people traveling on the week-end. She knew all about the war and understood these things. In fact, she did everything she could to help the war effort, like saving tinfoil and making sure the blackout curtains were tightly closed at night.

When the day arrived and they were finally on the train, she was alert and attentive, fixing everything in her brain so that she could tell her cousins all about it. She noticed everything, the smells, sounds, other passengers and the views from her window.

It was fun, learning how to walk down the aisle and lurch gracefully. She learned quickly, how to move her body and its weight with the sway of the train; and enjoyed watching others move down the aisle in that criss-cross way, like a new kind of dance.

With each stop, the car became more crowded, and she anticipated the call of the conductor, announcing the upcoming town in that funny way he had of saying

the names. She wondered if the railroad sent him to a special school to learn to pronounce them that way.

The car took on the odor peculiar to travelers. A scent that suggested impermanence, temporary, of belonging nowhere. She also smelled gum, freshly laundered clothing and Brylcreem.

The bathroom was interesting. So small, that even she didn't have much room for turning. It was the first time she had ever seen blue water in a toilet bowl and thought that it must be the reason for the strong and pungent odor. Then flushing it and washing her hands, she wondered where the water went. After all, they were moving, and while the train probably had tanks of clean water somewhere, it wouldn't have enough room to store all that dirty water. Maybe it just splattered between the rails and the blue stuff was there to decontaminate it.

Eating in the dining car turned out to be as much fun as it looked in the movies. She felt as special and important as any movie star she had ever seen.

When the train stopped at the small station which she knew was their destination, she could pick out her family. For the tall lady on the platform looked like her father and she knew it was his sister, Jessie, and that the grey haired lady next to her was their mother, her grandmother. Stepping down the high steps of the train, they came together in a flashing moment of hugs and kisses, first for her father and then for her. She felt shy, but happy, for at last she was meeting that other half of herself that she had wanted to know for such a long time.

Though she was accustomed to the soft vowels of a southern voice, theirs was different. She had to listen carefully to understand their words, for often they didn't say the last letter at all. The middle part of the word taking so long to say that it seemed to bump that last letter out of the way.

The town was very small, the houses far apart, with so much land between them that it seemed like miles.

Meeting her cousins when they came home from school was much like looking in the mirror, for they had long legs, fair hair, freckless and odd names just like her. Names like Curtis, Travis, Arabell, and Marilee. Her own name was Chessie. Her northern cousins were short, like her mother, had dark hair and names like everyone else, Barbara, John, Edward and Marilyn.

The new cousins called their mother and father, Mama and Daddy, like her father did, not, Mom and Dad, like she and her northern family.

For some reason, the cousins' accent was even more difficult to understand than the grownups' and she sometimes had to figure out just what the words were, and was glad that her own speech was so easy for them to understand.

Settling in at her Aunt Jessie's house, they were fed great amounts of food, just like at Thanksgiving. Some of it was unfamiliar to her, some prepared a different way from what she was accustomed to. Her father, she noticed, enjoyed it enormously, complimenting her grandmother and aunt, as if it had been a long time since he had had such a good meal.

In the living room, stood a huge fireplace, so high that a small man could stand inside, if it wasn't burning. It was a place of congregation after the evening meal. She and her cousins sat near the hearth, talking of snow, how to catch a fish, and other common interests. The adults talked of times past, of people they all knew, except her. Her father asked many questions: about crops, what old Dilly was up to

these days, and how is Uncle Fletcher. As the evening wore on, her father's speech began to take on the sound of the others: that slow, long middle part that sometime didn't quite get to the end, and he used expressions that she had never heard him use before.

The very next day after their arrival, they set out visiting, looking and eating. Her father had so many cousins, she couldn't believe it, and he laughed when he said, "Well, maybe J. D. is just a kissin' cousin."

But first, before anyone else, they had to visit Aunt Cally and Aunt Tally, her grandmother's sisters. Chessie thought it amusing that someone had named two daughters Ally, one with a C and one with a T. Was it because they just liked the name Ally, or because they couldn't think of another, she wondered. But, she didn't bring it up. Sometimes she sensed it was best not to ask about certain things.

Aunt Cally and Aunt Tally did not live that near each other and the visits took them all day. And it was fun. Their houses were pretty and gay, just like them, and with fireplaces crackling and cozy, around which they sat, just like at Aunt Jessie's. They spent time with her, showing her colorful quilts made by hand, hand woven fabric and how to use a loom. They ate biscuits with honey, which her father declared was the best in all the world, because it came from the Okefenokee.

She was glad it was far away and that her father didn't have any cousins near the Great Swamp. She had sat and listened once, while her Uncle Jake, her mother's brother, and her father talked about it. She pictured in her mind, bees, buzzing over the heads of alligators and cottonmouths, searching for the sweet blossoms, in woods so changing and thick that only creatures who fly could find their way home.

The next day, they visited Cousin Robert, who had fields of peanuts which seemed to have no end. They laughed when she was surprised to find peanuts growing in the earth, for she thought they grew on trees, like the butternuts in her own backyard. Cousin Robert and her father picked them as they walked along the roads, eating them with gusto, the way she ate her mother's fudge. She really liked peanuts, but didn't like these, and was told by her father that it was because they were raw, not roasted, which is what she was used to.

Her father reached down to the earth and grasped a handful of soil and sifted it into his other hand, before slowly letting it sprinkle back down to earth again. He did it lovingly, she thought. Then turning to cousin Robert said, "You've got good soil, Robert," as though he was speaking of a diety. Robert nodded in agreement.

As they were leaving, Cousin Robert pressed a large bag of peanuts into her father's hand. Pleased, he responded, "Much obliged to you, Robert, 'preciate it."

In their travels through the county, they stopped at a gristmill, where her father renewed his acquaintance with the old man who ran it. They explained to her how grain is ground into meal. Fascinated, she watched the big wheel descend to the water far below, groaning as it rose, turning the shaft and grinding the grain between the great stones. The smell of bounty and goodness filled the air and she felt close to her father.

On the same day, they stopped and walked from the road, to a place where clay lay red and moist. "It's the kind used for bricks and by potters," he told her: explaining how it was baked in big ovens to make it hard. Then he told her of the old man, Ben Tyler, in that wonderful way he had of telling a story, so that she watched

his face eagerly, waiting for the next word. Of how old Ben threw the clay, as if pounding it, and kneaded it like bread to make it pliable, then moistened it with water. She could just see old Ben, putting a slab of it on his wheel, pedaling with his foot, causing the wheel to turn and holding the clay between his hands as it came to life, reaching upward and outward into a pitcher, butterchurn or bowl. She secretly promised herself that she would get some of that clay someday. Work it between her fingers, mold it, make it come alive in her hands, until it was a part of her, and she a part of it, that rich Georgia earth.

Some days they just stayed at Aunt Jessie's and people came to see them. It was hard to believe that so many people lived in the countryside and that they all knew her father. Uncle Hal, Aunt Jessie's husband, said that Virgie was coming. Her father was pleased, and she gathered from the conversation that Virgie didn't live that nearby anymore, that it was some distance for him to travel. She was impressed to know that someone liked her father so much that he would go to all that trouble to see him.

When Virgie arrived, he and her father embraced one another, the way men do, slapping each other on the back, laughing and talking all at once. Virgie called him Mr. Robbie and when introduced to her, called her Miss Chessie. It was the first time she had ever heard anyone call her father by his first name with Mr. before it, or who had ever called her Miss. But, she knew it had something to do with their being white and his being negro.

She liked Virgie. His smile was big and his face happy. They talked, as always, of the past: of boyhood days of squirrel hunting and nights of hunting possum. She could tell her father really liked Virgie and that their friendship meant a lot to him.

They all laughed when Virgie told stories, and of how Granddaddy Erwin took him aside one day saying, "Virgil? Considering the number of nights you and my grandson go possum hunting, I've yet to see a possum come home. Now, either you two boys are sitting under some tree, licking your lips on moonshine or you're the worst two possum hunters in all of Decatur County." The laughter grew louder as Virgie continued, explaining that he wasn't leading granddaddy's fatherless grandson down evil roads, and finally blurting out that it was Mr. Robbie's fault, because he had such big feet in the woods at night and made so much noise. Her father laughed until tears ran down his cheeks. The air was filled with the happy talks of pleasant days of long ago, when the unlikely pair shared friendship, water and food.

Her grandfather died when her father was small and his grandfather old. She wondered if Virgie somehow became the man assigned by life, or perhaps her Granddaddy Erwin, to do those things with her father that no one else could do. Not that it really mattered, she decided.

The last day visiting, they paid a call on Cousin Corbett. "He's not a kissin' cousin," her father told her solemnly, "our daddy's were brothers." Somehow, she knew that Cousin Corbett was a little more special than the others and patted her dress to smooth it and rubbed the specks of dust off her shoes. She knew he had peach orchards and her father pointed to a curve in the road, announcing in that respectful voice he used, "That's where Corbett's land begins." They drove for what seemed like miles and miles: the trees standing in ordered rows, like a million sentinals, guarding Cousin Corbett's earth. Barren now, because of the time of year, she tried to imagine them with blossoms, then peaches, rosy and sweet.

The house sat high on a knoll, overlooking many barns, some of which she could tell held machinery. It reminded her of one she had seen in a magazine once. Inside, it was elegant and everything so shiny, that she sat primly, afraid that she might spoil its perfection by causing dust to move, or just by being there, disturb it. It smelled like a museum, not at all like the other houses they had visited. Curling and uncurling her hands, she tried to remember all the things her father had taught her about manners, of sitting up straight and looking people in the eye when she spoke.

She listened, sitting motionless, while Cousin Corbett complained about how hard it was to get farm hands, because of the war; parts for machinery, because of the war; of problems shipping, because of the war; and she wondered how a man as rich as he, with such a fine house, so much machinery and all those peach trees, could look so worried and be so unhappy. She was glad when they finally left and thought of Aunt Cally and Aunt Tally, of their small, cheerful homes and who were so happy, contented and satisfied with life. She decided right then and there that she wanted to be like them when she grew up.

The night before their departure, the reunited family sat together for the last time before the great fireplace. The conversation was low now and muted, not jovial as it had been before. Her father called the children to him. Standing up, he pulled his big hand from his pocket; smiling, he opened it, revealing enormous, round, sparkling, silver dollars. He explained what they were. Then told them what fine "young'uns" they were: of how proud their Mama and Daddy must be of them, how happy he was to have seen them and that he hoped they would not forget him when he went back to Yankee Land. They stood, nodding, never taking their eyes off the glistening mound in his hand. Then dispensing his approval and love, he placed one in each outstretched hand. As each received the silvery gift, he or she jumped up and down with delight. They all started talking at once, of what they would buy with their unexpected wealth, changing their minds as fast as the silver caught the light, deciding on something else.

Believing that her father had made a mistake and somehow overlooked her, Chessie touched him on the sleeve. He turned from the rejoicing cousins and glowered at her, as if she had disturbed him. Softly, she asked if she could have one, too. Angry, he snarled at her. "I don't have anymore. Besides, you don't need one," his growing voice sounding like a growl, ending with, "Watcha want one of those for?" He quickly closed his fist and put his hand back into his pocket.

But he did have more. She saw them, before he closed his hand and when he gave them out. She was startled, not expecting him to become angry with her like that and fell silent. But only for a moment, and quickly joined her excited cousins, smiling and enthusiastic, helping them to make up their minds over what to buy with that wondrous prize. She knew what she would do if her father had given her a silver dollar, so bright, so perfectly round and sparkling. She wouldn't spend it at all. She would keep that beautiful gift forever, to look at and hold in her hand, to remind herself of how much her father loved her and of how much she loved him.

Then she ran to the window to look for the cat. When they first arrived, she had noticed him about, always apart from the family and activities. She tried many times to get near him so that she could pick him up. But, he always ran off. When she asked his name, one of her cousins said that he didn't have one. She thought that that was very strange. And when she kept trying to get near him, one explained that

he was just an old barn cat. "Don't you feed him?" she asked, alarmed. "Oh yeah, Grandma puts out milk for him in the morning," came the uninterested reply, that sounded as if she was being silly to be so concerned about an old barn cat. She watched him each day, wishing that he would come to her, so that she could pick him up. But he never did. She learned his habits and knew that when everyone was inside, he would come to the step and curl up in the darkness. He was always separate and apart from the household, yet nearby, as though he wanted to be near where they were. If she had such a fine cat, she would give him a name, love him, bring him into the house and let him sleep on her bed.

She couldn't see him in the darkness and flicked on the light, hoping to get a glimpse of him, before he ran off. But he wasn't there. Disappointed, she turned out the light and returned to the festivities of the others.

Before she went to bed that night, she stood in front of the mirror, looking at herself for a long time, peering at her face, trying to find the reason why her father had no silver dollar for her.

Their leaving the next day was much like their arrival, with hugs and kisses, only now there were tears when her grandmother and Aunt Jessie hugged her father. She didn't like it when grownups were teary and was relieved to get on the train. They stood on the platform waving, until the distance and the curves made them disappear. She settled back for the long trip home.

She was tired and no longer excited about riding the train. The trip having been made, she knew all about it.

When darkness fell, she dozed, waking up when the vendor came through the car with his wares of old sandwiches, warm milk and cigarettes. Her father beckoned him over to buy some cigarettes. Taking his hand out of his pocket to pay for them, she spotted those silver dollars, brilliant and flashing, striking her eyes with their light. Chessie turned away.

The lights inside the car were turned down, so that the passengers could rest. She looked out of the window. The blackness of the night beyond made a mirror if it, bouncing back to her, her reflection. She found that by getting closer to the window and pressing her face against the glass, it went away. Looking up at the sky, she was thankful that there was no moon and stared into the darkness. Her eyes caught a distant light. Not wanting to see that either, she looked at a point before it, concentrating on it, so as to cut the light from her vision. But somehow, she couldn't hold the focus and her eyes kept gravitating to it, against her will.

She finally gave it up, resting her head in the corner and thought of how tomorrow she would be home, of her mother, of sledding and sleeping in her own bed. Chilly, she pulled her coat around herself and then made a face in disdain, for it had taken on the scent of a traveler.

Then she closed her eyes and fell asleep to the rhythmic moans of the wheels, which set off a chant in her brain of, "up home, my people, up home, my people."

Beverly Harrington

I scared up a muskrat
when I threw away your letters
this morning and sunk 'em
with a big rock.
And also I threw out
society's mother f----- n'
values, false prophets
and politics.
I got twenty-eight grams of
Red Lebanese hash
in a duffel-bag that's
too big for what else I got.
But I heard of some highway
'long Kentucky and Virginia
where Daniel Boone was
and the Indians —
I'm gonna go walk it.

Sue O'Neill

Freckle

The floor creaks above my head — the only sound I've heard in an hour. My stomach gives a short hop and my hands tense; on edge but ready. Two in the morning doesn't excuse a poor creeper, Dad; but you wouldn't know. I do, though; I saw it in your yellow-green eyes tonight after I screamed at you for hurting Mom once more. Usually, you'd shout back in that smoldering ignorance, fueling the fire, but not tonight. Oh no, not tonight. You turned to me slowly with a cold, dull stare and walked from the room, pausing at the door to repeat the glare. A chill speared me, but a slight one, like a worn-out spring; I've been expecting this.

You see, it's not me that I worry about. I know, everyone pities the children ... but inside, in the very depths of my being, I know that I can rely on me if on no one else. I don't really consider myself yours anyway, Dad; I think I'd be one too many for you, you know? Mom gave you everything, and for what? She could've had it all, anything she wanted. Those wedding pictures in her trunk — she was beautiful then, Dad, almost stunning ... You promised to drop the bottle if she'd marry you, you bastard, and what have you done for her? I see the two of you together and it squeezes my soul, you know? It wasn't enough to pollute yourself; you had to drag her down with you. My insides split open and pour every time Mom looks at me with her blue eyes, those blue eyes that have pierced me through the window of forty-five years from a picture, just a picture. You took the life from them, Dad ... How can you live with yourself?

How the hell have you made it through your fifty-two pitiful years, anyway? Granted, you've had a sitter for thirty of them, but I can recall half a dozen times when you could've — should've — been killed, but damn the angels anyway. What about the time you staggered out in front of those cars, that stream of cars, on Main Street? The ambulance driver couldn't believe that anyone that pickled could've even been conscious, but it was no surprise to me. F— you and your good luck, Dad; I wish to hell that the car had been going just ten miles an hour faster because it would release me. And when you came home, Mom waited on you hand and foot long after she and I both knew that you were well enough to go back to work, or at least start getting your own meals again. I got you then, too — I came home early that night and caught you downstairs in your workshop swilling whiskey and watching your stupid cartoons. You were furious, Dad, just like tonight. I know what you're thinking, but you'd better hold on tight — do you know how many times I've directed this play? You already have Mom; you snuffed her spirit long ago, but underestimation is a grave error, no?

I think that it first struck me when I was about eight ... Do you remember? It was maybe nine, nine-thirty at night, and you had just come home with Ray. You had stopped off on your way home from work, like you usually did, and you came into the house bellowing in that pompous, arrogant voice that I was so tired of, even then. You both carried on like you were thirteen, and all Mom could do was nervously sigh and tell you again and again to "keep it down, Jack, the neighbors ..."

But you didn't give a damn about her or me or the neighbors. No, you staggered around the living room, slurring, "To hell with the neighbors, Doris! I pay my taxes — I'm a US citizen and this is my house!"

I was both mortified and furious; I certainly didn't want to be known around the

neighborhood as "The Drunk's Daughter." I silently finished getting ready for bed and was on my way out of the living room when you said, "Come and kiss Daddy goodnight."

I turned and looked with disgust into your glazed, yellowed eyes. Mustering my eight years worth of gut, I spat, "Go to hell!"

Mom reeled back and brought her hand around to slap me, but I ducked and was off and running — running from both of you. That was the first of what has become a series of sequels: you coming home loud and drunk and taking it out on Mom, me springing to defend her, you getting angry and sullen and stomping to your room or out the door, slamming it behind you. Then Mom tells me that it's my fault for upsetting you, that I'll never learn ... I've learned, all right — good and quick.

The next morning, when I was making breakfast, I came over to the table to see what you wanted. You ignored me, as usual — reading the paper, back facing me. I looked at you, solidly filling — almost overlapping — the chair, and this kind of cloud filled my mind. I was just about level with the back of your head, and as you began to rattle directions off to me, everything began to slow, clicking down almost to a stop. I studied that part of your scalp that your cowlick juts from, uniformly ruffled — like a windblown field. There were a few flecks of dandruff scattered about, and you had been sloppy with the hair oil that morning. As I stood there, transfixed, my right hand began to spasm ever so faintly, lightly bouncing the frying pan that I still held. World beginning to hum, I was aware of nothing except that crimson freckle next to the cowlick and the distant tugging of the pan, the cast-iron pan, tensing my bicep rhythmically and releasing it so. It bounced lightly, musing and almost vibrating with intensity. I followed the trail of that tiny scar through its oily forest, and — almost imperceptibly — my forearm drew itself up. The bounces became quicker and shorter, much like the downcourt dribble of a basketball forward. As the contractions of my bicep sharpened and quickened, all background sounds became imminent. I heard the crackle of the fire and felt each pop echo through me as if in a deserted cathedral. The rapid-fire of the moisture sizzling from the wood matched the almost frenzied dribble of that pan, and the spasms had become almost audible, sharp and wrenching as they were. Approaching a fantastic crescendo, my shoulder pivoted, raised my elbow, and tensed for the final shot. Heart and eyes pounding, I saw, heard, felt — nothing. Nothing but that internal thrumming, soaring through every limb, every cell. I was at once both organic and electric — electric with the enveloping vibration, the pulsating excitation of my hand, my arm, my freedom. Raising the pan over my head, I centered on that shining crimson freckle.

Mom came down the hallway.

She came bustling into the kitchen, finding me in back of you with the pan raised over my head. I whirled to face her, and the pan crashed behind me, clattering to a rest on the hearth. Vaulting out of your chair, paper in flight, you lunged at me with a rotten scowl. Grabbing me by the wrist, you shook me violently, back and forth, screaming about morning quiet and doing as I was told. Mom yelled back at you and you tried to push her away, but — for once — she fought back. Pummeling you with her free hand, she managed to pull me away, but not before your Granger ring had dug a trench into my left wrist, spouting a ribbon of blood. I still carry that — it looks like a suicide scar.

My mind flies back to one of the few times that I can remember being happy with you: it was that time that you took me fishing when I was four. We sat on the dock, about this far apart, and didn't catch a thing. It didn't matter to me, though — I was happy just to be there with you, Dad. I don't quite know where all of that changed, but I'm so sorry that it had to be this way.

Well, Dad, ten years have passed since that morning, and only the times seem to have changed. Your oily mouse-brown hair has gone a dirty gray, and a couple of new scars thread across your scalp. Your eyes have faded and clouded some more, if that's possible. I don't know, maybe it's my own fault, but you seem to have faded as well, Dad, at least physically. It turns my stomach to even look at you, and when you speak I want to slam your mouth shut. I know that you can't stand me, either; it's obvious when the three of us are together. I learned long ago not to bother telling you anything; you belittle my triumphs and gloat over my failures. I wonder about some of my friends' parents, whether they're really as happy as they seem, or maybe it's the universal facade, you know? If there are really normal families out there, whatever normal is, how did your stone get cast to the other shore, Dad? It's too bad that you couldn't have tossed it back, but I'm not too sure that you ever had a chance, really. I do, though, and I won't blow it. I'll make it if it's the only thing I ever do.

I wonder why it took you so long to spark, Dad — I've been expecting it for a couple of years now. As I sit here in stoical blackness, I can feel the years of tension inside. I know you feel it, too — it passed between us tonight in that glare of yours. Even though I've known this was coming, it's still something of a surprise; I guess you can't rehearse for something like this.

The floor creaks again. You must be getting out of bed now. Have you been lying awake these three hours, planning? How will it be, Dad? Your bare hands, or are you too smart for that? A knife? That sounds more like you, Dad, but all this comes with no real pause or reverence; I've had it planned for years. Do you remember the cast-iron dribble, Dad? Since then ... I've known since then.

Again, the creak, a hair longer this time and a bit more pronounced. It sounds like the dining room — yes, I just heard the hushed bump of the table. You must have caught it with your knee; you're a really sorry excuse for a creeper, you know it? By some miracle of chance, you managed to take Mom, but for God's sake, do you really think that you can have me, too? Not with moves like that.

A faint, steady squeal as the doorknob at the top of the stairs turns. The door whispers open. I strain to catch a glimpse of you in the dark, but there's no moon tonight. You begin to creep down the stairs, ever so slowly. I can hear each breath now, and as you ease onto the fourth step, one catches in your throat. Yeah, Dad, that stair creaks. You should have known that.

A minute or so passes before you continue. I am crouched and ready at the foot of the stairs, one hand on the light switch, the other by my side, cradling my sanity. I run my forefinger along the grip, senses aroused by its stucco-like texture. As you descend upon the seventh step, I flick the safety to "fire." It clicks almost silently. I feel — rather than hear — you pause again. Uncertain now, you deliberate, motionless. I can almost see your face furrowing as you debate ... you decide that it was your imagination. You move slightly, shifting weight. We are about three feet apart now.

That old dribble just started again while I was thinking. I have more control now, though; so much more control. My foot begins to jitter, but just a little, and I keep my hands calm and steady — Mom's not here to yank me away this time. Nonetheless, my shoulders and back clench to incredible tenseness, and my heart hammers my ribs about. How can you not hear that? You don't, though, for you take another stair — two more to go. I raise my forearm, dribble suppressed, and you take another step. You pause then, one step from the floor, and I think that you feel it then. My elbow is bent; I extend my right thumb and then retract it, cocking the hammer. This time I know that you hear it, for I hear a short blast of air from your nostrils. You move, then, onto the floor, and you smile; I can hear your lips separate, breaking the thin film of mucus that forever plagues your chapped lips. You give a little snort of mirth, and the tears run over my lids and down my cheeks as you croak.

"You forget to kiss Daddy goodnight."

I flip on the light switch and a sob catches in my throat. You stand here before me, nude, with only my toy fox in your hand. Foxy Loxy, the stuffed animal that Mom got me when I was only four months old. I wore all the fur off its back, sleeping with it clutched in my baby hands. I see its straining seam as you hold it out to me.

"You forgot your am-nul. Here, take Foxy to bed," your filthy fingers clutch suddenly, splitting his seam, and tremble as you crush him. A bit of stuffing falls to the rug. "And you forgot to give me a kiss goodnight." You extend your arms, dropping Foxy's remains to the floor, and as I raise the gun I think wildly about my watercolors; they are decorating your body, swirling and striping and ... spotting in places. Your hands tremble, reaching for me, clutching at nothing. I gargle a sob as you smile and give me a yellow leer. You make a grab for the gun. I dribble once — quickly — then shoot.

Goodnight, Daddy.

Donna J. Moran

awake.
O God, I'm awake?!
i open my eyes slowly
and focus on your stuffed blue face,
your plastic eyes, and
cotton smile ...
(which one of us puked on the bed?)
i remember thinking i
wish we were twins —
and it took everything
i had
to do it.
but i guess i
didn't have enough stuffing
or methadone
to be you.
the room's turning slowly
and the sun hurts my eyes ...
O Blue Bear,
i wish you could hold me.

Sue O'Neill

once i saw you
while i was out on the cool grass
with words singing in the breeze
dancing around me

i was running happily down my field of green
when you stopped me and asked
where do tears grow?

i should have just said i didn't know
i should have just pushed you away
but instead i thought about it
and let it ruin my day

and the tears fell down like rain
and the rain fell on my field
and there the tears grew.

john ruel

The rose
flaking pink
a garment
you chose for me
And put me beneath —
under you.
Chapped color
pushing falling crumbs
from safe outboards
to pungent waters
And fragrant fish
devour my last
evidence.

Your rose
Smiling
all the while
beneath her
garment
was a melting,
flaking core
of permanent
stains.
And thorns
that flickered
in their hot masses,
Beneath your sailing
flying
crumbling
image
of me.

Tammy Armstrong

Chicago

I was just getting in from a wild night of partying with Vicky. She had to be home by twelve on weekends because her mom was a bitch. When I got in, the phone was ringing. I knew who it was. "It's Donnie," I thought. Donnie was my best friend. We grew up together; at this point we had already known each other fourteen years. We were always up to something and seemed to have a natural talent for getting in trouble.

I wondered whether or not to answer it. I wasn't sure if I wanted to spend the rest of the night in jail or not. Maybe. I wasn't tired, anyway. So I picked up the phone and said, "Hey, dick nose." There was no reply. (It's embarrassing when you answer the phone like that and it's not who you expected.)

"Hey, beagle beak," I let out a sigh of relief. "Let's head up to Bill's place and have a few drinks," he said.

I said, "Come pick me up."

"Later," he said.

Bill's place is a bar a friend of ours owns, so drinks for us are on the house. We got there about twelve-fifty. There was some old broad sitting a couple of stools down, running arthritic fingers through her tangled black hair. She was mumbling something about how she earned her nightly ration of booze by working on her knees, cheap. On the other side, two giggling faggots shared a joint and bragged about picking pockets in North Chicago.

Bill grabbed a bottle then crossed the room to join us. He handed me the bottle. It was three quarters empty. I rubbed my eyes; the smoke was burning them.

I took a slug of vodka, looked at the bottle and said, "What the hell," then drained it. Fumes stung my throat and the back of my nose, starting a fire in my stomach that warmed my whole body.

Bill left to return with a fresh bottle. He's an enormous individual: 6'5", 270 pounds and one hell of a temper. On his way back, he told the fags and the old whore to hit the road. They drifted away, crawling back under their rocks.

Bill poured Donnie and me another double vodka. We emptied our glasses, poured another drink, lit another cigarette, and did a few lines. Then Bill wanted to go to his house. He had some good grass and he wanted to cook up some pizzas and smoke some. He invited us to go with him. I downed my drink. It may as well have been water: no effect at all.

Donnie downed his and said, "Let's go."

Five minutes later we were in Donnie's pickup driving down 15, heading for Bill's house. A warm breeze through the window lifted my hair and floated strands around my face. Then it started to rain.

When we got to Bill's house, I had to take a leak and didn't want to wait until we got inside, so I decided to use the alley, and got out of the truck. When I opened the door, a couple of Whopper wrappers got caught in the breeze and drifted off into the darkness. The rain seemed to have washed the air and heightened my sense of smell. Great ... if you're in a field of daisies, but in the black cave of the alley, it only accentuated the odor of urine I splashed on the wall and the stink of moldy garbage and dog shit.

"What the hell am I doing here?" I wondered. I lit another cigarette and headed into the house.

It was a dismal little house. Given a good cleaning and airing, it would still be a dump. The combination living room and kitchen was small with low ceilings. It was chilly and it smelled like mold. There was an old sofa and chair on the right side of the room. They sagged in front of a blackened fireplace and a coffee table. On the opposite side of the room, a kitchen filled the remaining space with an old propane stove, a wall hung sink, and only one window. In between sat a dusty table. There were two vodka bottles on it; one drained, one half full.

Bill's mother walked into the room. All she had on was a skimpy old robe with nothing on underneath. She was in a drunken stupor and it looked like her hair hadn't been washed or combed in weeks. Bill's mom is an alcoholic and this wasn't the first time we'd seen her this way. Bill was pissed at her because she stole the booze from his bar again.

She mumbled something like "Why don't you have your picnic outside." She reached for the bottle on the table but before she reached it, Bill grabbed her wrist.

"We're just fine where we are." He squeezed until she gasped with pain. "Why do you have to spoil everything? I just want to spend some time with my friends. Is that asking too much?" You could see the intensity on his face as he squeezed harder. You could hear the bones grinding together.

"Bill, don't, you f-----." He let go. She staggered backwards and fell to the floor.

"Bill, it's getting late. Your friends have to leave."

"I know what you're doing," Bill said. "You don't give a damn what time it is. You just can't wait to go screw your boyfriend."

I asked Donnie if he wanted to leave but he wanted to stick around to see what happened.

"I'm going to call the police," she said. Before she could move another step, Bill had one hand around her throat and a big butcher knife in the other.

"You f----- slut. Steal my booze and screw my customers then you try to kick me out of the house I paid for." Bill threw his mother on the floor, then knelt down on her and tore off her robe. "Feel good, slut? I'm going to kill you right now!"

"Get off me, you bastard! Help! Help me! You f-----, I hate you! Help me, please, somebody!" She screamed fiercely.

Donnie watched like he was attending a sporting event. Bill held the knife firmly at her throat.

"Can they stay? Say yes or I'll kill you right now!"

"No! I hate you! Get off me! Help! Help me! Somebody, please, please. Help me!"

"It's simple, you say they can stay and I'll let you up. If you say no, I'll kill you. Can they stay?"

"All right, All right, they can stay." She got up slowly and stared a hateful glare at him. There was a small amount of blood on her neck where Bill had pressed the knife. She walked off into her room, mumbling.

Bill looked at us and said "The f----- bitch, I should have killed her."

My peripheral vision caught movement behind me. Before I could turn around, she had already started to unload her 38. Donnie and I both dove to the floor.

"Is it time to go yet, dick nose?" I said. There was a hole in the wall above us. Little chips of plaster fell on us and the floor.

"I'm going to kill you, you'd better hide!" Bill screamed as he came around the corner with a big shotgun. Blood covered his right shoulder and dripped down his arm into his hand.

"This is it! I'm going to blow your f----- head off!" BOOM! He fired a shot that took out the kitchen window. "Hear that, Mom? It will be the last sound you hear!" he screamed.

"We'll talk to you later, Bill. Sure you don't want to come with us?"

"No! I'm going to kill her right now!"

"Good luck," we said. "Talk to you later."

We laid down outside the house so we didn't get hit by any stray gunfire. Donnie wanted to stay to hear the shots that would cost Bill's mom her life.

It was so quiet for a minute, just the sound of crickets and the smell of fresh morning dew on the grass. Then we heard an exchange of gunfire I'll never forget.

Screams, neighbor's windows shattering, finally sirens. That's when we split.

All day I couldn't stop thinking about the night before. Was Bill dead? Was his mother dead? Was I in any trouble?

When I saw it in the newspaper that day, the article read: "Instead of exchanging valentines on Valentine's day, mother and son exchange gunfire. Neither one was seriously injured." Life goes on.

John Monson

Timothy

For my youngest son 9/23/78 — 1/10/86

I remember buying you a candy bar around midnight. Out of the machine in the cafeteria. The kid next to you wanted one too, but his mother told him only an idiot would give her kid chocolate at that hour. I'm glad I did. Really glad.

You asked me if I thought Rick would be mad if you gave away the teddy bear he bought you. You wanted a baby in your room to have it. And I told you to go ahead and give it to him. After you did that, a teenager gave you his Snoopy balloon; for what I knew was the very same reason you unloaded your teddy bear.

You told me you had been praying to God not to have any more needles. You didn't say you prayed to die. But it was the same thing. That was understood. Only death could change that. You told me you were okay. You didn't want me to worry about you. Little kids go to heaven and are okay.

I didn't comfort you. You comforted me. I never said anything about being okay ..., only you did. I didn't feel okay at all.

The only real sadness I sensed in you is when you called Rick and said good-bye. That seemed hard for you to do.

The next day was the day you died. Before, all those days we were there; all those many, many days, the other kids never bothered you. But that day, I remember you had a real big problem looking at them. You asked the doctor to please not bring you around them. It wasn't a matter of privacy. It was more of a hurt you were feeling. I don't think it was you that you were hurting for, though, but for them. There would still be more needles for them. And not you. It was going to be all over for you. Just the heaven and the okay.

I had wanted to rock you right before you died, but you didn't want me to. You wanted to draw. So a nurse brought you crayons and a root beer, too. You drew your cat. Not just your cat. But an unusual picture that seemed to be all symbolic. Tiger was flying away on balloons. Strange picture that later brought me tons of peace. I hadn't noticed at the time, but Tiger had a big smile on his face. I love that picture, now. It hangs on my bedroom wall.

After, when you were dead, I told the doctor I wasn't leaving until I could rock you. You were bleeding so excessively that they said I'd have to wait until they could clean you up — to the extent that you could be cleaned up.

So I very calmly sat and drank coffee with my mother until they unhooked you and buried you in blankets. And then I rocked you while the nurse watched T.V. and the irony of it all hit me. The world had not stopped for anyone but me. And somehow this didn't offend me.

Having spent so much time at Children's Hospital myself, I can remember doing the same thing. Watching T.V. while kids around me died. It gets to be your life. You accept what you have to.

And I can remember singing to you, but softly, because I was embarrassed to have anyone hear me do it. This really strikes me strange today. That I would care. But at the time, I had some real deep sense of wanting to keep my cool and not upset the other parents whose kids were still hanging on.

A priest came and I didn't like that at all. It was what upset me the most, I think. I didn't want to hear "pray for me" shit. You were so young and so innocent. You

had nothing to forgive or anything. I didn't want anyone to pray for you. Or me, either. You didn't need prayers and I felt beyond them.

It was really important to me to thank the doctors. They were the very best to me. And still are. Just the very best. They even sent flowers for your funeral. And Dr. Freed sent me a letter after. I was so thankful for everyone. Except the priest.

Three other kids in that room died that day, too. Including the little boy from Moncton who was having the kidney transplant. The News had been following his story. There were camera men and T.V. crews all over when I was trying to sign autopsy papers. I can remember thinking they had no right to be there, and trying to stay away from them. It was wrong for them to be there. I still think it was.

Arlene Goudreau

For Sylvia Plath

Why?
God damn it, why!
I would have loved you!
I've read everything
but too late,
and I'm glad that
it was too late
'cause I could have died with you.
Your poverty stricken heart
full of what you saved and nurtured
was mistaken in believing
it could get that back.
You wrote,
"a grey wall, clawed and bloody,
is there no way out of the mind?"
I guess
you found your way out; gee, that's great.
The crickets still sing
in the crack by your door
and so does the opiate rain.
God, it hurts, it hurts;
and I understand too well
why you put your head in the oven.

Sue O'Neill

Population Density

Ice cracked the snow-peaked mountains. It was cold. Very cold. But not for the Iceman. The man in the snow.

He had some sled dogs. But they died. Years ago. He missed them. Fred. Louise. George. Tyronne. Wilfred. Cecilia. Norma. Gene.

But life goes on. He trekked about the snow. Without a purpose. Without a mind. He was a professional. Wandered.

"See my armpits," he said, "they don't stink. Not even of mud pies." He's right. He didn't.

He trekked along. No ties. Very friendly. No purpose. 'Cept to trek. Nice guy.

He gazed at the sky. Loved the clouds. They look like him. White. They act like him. Wandering.

We love him. Everyone does. He did nothing. Said nothing much. We love him.

Lived in a wall. A wall near a cave. Bothered no one. Just sat there and stared. Stared endlessly into the air.

Offended no one. Ever. Did nothing. 'Cept wander. Stare. Nothing.

We cried when he died. So did the community. What he did for us! And we so little for him.

V.L. Gilbert

